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ABSTRACT

This report is comprised of brief summaries of various research-based and theoretical concepts and techniques--taken mostly from business management--that might improve educational administration. The topics discussed include (1) a list of successful business practices identified by the book, "In Search of Excellence"; (2) Theories X, Y, and Z, which distinguish modes of relationship between organizations and their personnel; (3) "management by walking around"; (4) one-minute praise or reprimands for employees, as suggested by the book, "The One Minute Manager"; (5) leadership styles that adapt to employees' varying "maturity levels"; (6) quality circles; (7) organizational transformation--working to realize a vision "through clearly articulated humanistic values"; and (8) participatory research, in which respondents help define the questions. A bibliography is included. (MCG)

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OSSC REPORT

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New Ideas for School Improvement

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One of the most exciting things about American businesses and American schools is the endless opportunity to experiment with how we do things.

This experimentation is also a primary source of confusion and frustration. How can we keep up with trends and ideas? How do we know what works and what doesn't? How do we hold on to the best of what we know while we try out an unknown? If we don't have the time or money for an evaluation expert, how do we know in advance what may work for one school and not for another?

The following pages include brief summaries of major findings in recent theory and practice. Examples from schools are included where available. Neither the theory overview nor the good-school-practices lists are complete; they are chosen in the hope that at some point before the last paragraph, each reader will say, "Mmmm, that sounds interesting--let's look into that."

Replacing "Lip Service" with Participation

Teachers and other staff in schools and school districts have always had much to contribute to the management of instruction and the management of schools. Opportunities to contribute have usually been restricted, however, to departmental or curriculum meetings where someone else sets the agenda, or to suggestion boxes and other "lip service" techniques. Whether administrators took suggestions to heart or not, many of us often felt that our participation was for show alone.

Now, many ideas about real participation are being tried in both the public and private sectors. School site councils, quality teams, and quality circles are all techniques being tried in schools to increase participation in decision-making and to increase the chances that the best decisions will be made around any particular problem area.

Peters and Waterman: In Search of Excellence

One of the most successful compilations of recent theory and practice in the business world is the best-selling book In Search of Excellence (Peters and Waterman 1982). Many of the basic principles discovered by the authors in their study of forty-three successful companies will look familiar to readers of the school effectiveness literature. What is found in successful companies is also often found in successful schools.

Is there a relationship? First, let's look at Peters and Waterman's eight basic principles:

1. A Bias for Action. America's best-run companies have a preference for doing something--anything--instead of analyzing an issue to death.

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2. Customer. The best-run companies learn who the customer is, what the customer prefers, and caters to the preferences.

3. Autonomy. Individual functional units are encouraged to think and act independently and to try local solutions to problems. Individual units are encouraged to compete with each other.

4. Productivity Through People. The managers of best-run companies create in all employees the sense that everyone's best efforts are essential to the success of the company. Employees share in the rewards of success.

5. Hands-on, Value Driven. The business of the company is well known to everyone in the company. Executives keep in touch with the essential business of the company. Values are clearly spelled out and are related to the goals of the company.

6. Stick to the Knitting. The company remains with the business it knows best.

7. Simple Form. There are few administrative layers.

8. Simultaneous Loose/Tight Properties. Individual needs and differences are tolerated, but in a broad climate of dedication to the core values of the company.

Even without a more detailed reading of exactly what the authors mean by each of these broad categories, similarities to current ideas on school effectiveness are obvious. Most successful schools include a focus on action that is organized around the improvement of learning (the "product" of schools) and that is largely carried out as a single-school, team-focused effort (Lezotte and Bancroft 1985).

Effective schools have a strong sense of mission ("value-driven"), involve everyone in the effort ("productivity through people"), focus all efforts ultimately on improved learning ("stick to the knitting"), and tolerate or use individual strengths for achievement of the goal of improved learning (McCormack-Larkin 1985).

The parallels are significant, and they exist because the practices of America's best-run companies and America's most effective schools are following some essential elements of work organization and motivation now documented as essential by many research studies. Researchers have learned much in the past two decades about the meaning of work to individuals and groups (Steers and Porter 1983). Work may be important to individuals for different reasons ranging from exchange of effort for dollars to a way to develop or extend friendships.

Each individual also comes to a particular employer or job with different skills as well as unique motivations for working. Skills and motivating factors may all change over time. Research has shown that organizations that are flexible enough to identify, accommodate, and utilize the individual's unique set of interests and capabilities for the ultimate goals of the employer will have satisfied, productive employees and a successful company or school. This may sound like a self-evident conclusion, but it is in profound contrast to modern management practices.

Theory X, Theory Y, Theory Z

In 1960, Douglas McGregor published a book arguing for the importance of trust and faith in people. This "Theory Y" approach was in contrast, he argued, to the "Theory X" assumptions most managers held about most employees: Theory X employees were fundamentally lazy and unmotivated. They required constant supervision and very simplified, codified jobs. McGregor and others argued for increased participation in all parts of the organization for the good of the employees and the employer.

Abraham Maslow first used the term Theory Z to describe a "self-actualizing" organization. The term has since been popularized by William Ouchi in his analysis of differences between American and Japanese companies (Ouchi 1981). The basic approach is well documented in the studies by Pascale and Athor (1981). New Theory Z management practices include:

1. unity or goals
2. a cooperative team approach
3. genuine concern for employee welfare
4. consensus decision-making
5. facilitated communications
6. concern beyond short-term benefits

This list from research studies looks a lot like the effective schools list and the successful business practices list. Research and successful practice both seem to be pointing toward more participation by more people in achieving the goals of the organization. We are on a healthy participative management track when we try to implement school improvement suggestions.

What specific management practices can be borrowed to increase school effectiveness? Pheasant outlined a successful Theory Z transfer in last month's OSSC Bulletin, Theory Z Bargaining Works: Teachers and Administrators in Two School Districts Replace Hostility with Trust. Other ideas are described in the following pages.

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Leading by Walking

One of the unique management practices described by Peters and Waterman is the method of management by walking around (MBWA). They found that leaders in successful companies routinely take time to stroll through the work areas of the company. These informal meanderings appear unplanned, but are in fact a careful, systematic means to maintain a real sense of the work site.

The walker should be polite and nonjudgmental, but also on the lookout for use of recommended practices for people having trouble, for complaints and negative remarks, and for logistical problems that may be addressed later. Many of today's principals or superintendent's may think that this time-consuming practice could not possibly yield results worth the use of precious time. However, Peters and Waterman document the practical and social advantages of the practice.

One-Minute Responses

Another surprisingly simple technique for maintaining good feedback between executives and employees is suggested by Blanchard and Johnson in their 1981 runaway bestseller, The One Minute Manager. Although the slim book (111 pages) may make anyone question its price and value, the simple techniques for quick employee feedback are well founded in research (Hersey and Blanchard 1981).

The author suggests three quick techniques for improving a sense of purpose and communications. First, personal goal setting can be accomplished in a very brief format. Goals can be written out on a single sheet of paper and agreed to by employee and employer. The goal can be reread periodically to check performance against goals.

Second, Blanchard and Johnson recommend one-minute praising and one-minute reprimands as quick ways to communicate a precise message. These brief interactions are simple, structured, to the point, and followed by positive closure.

Managers report that the practice works. If you still can't bring yourself to spend hard-earned dollars on the little book, it's worth borrowing from a friend or the local library.

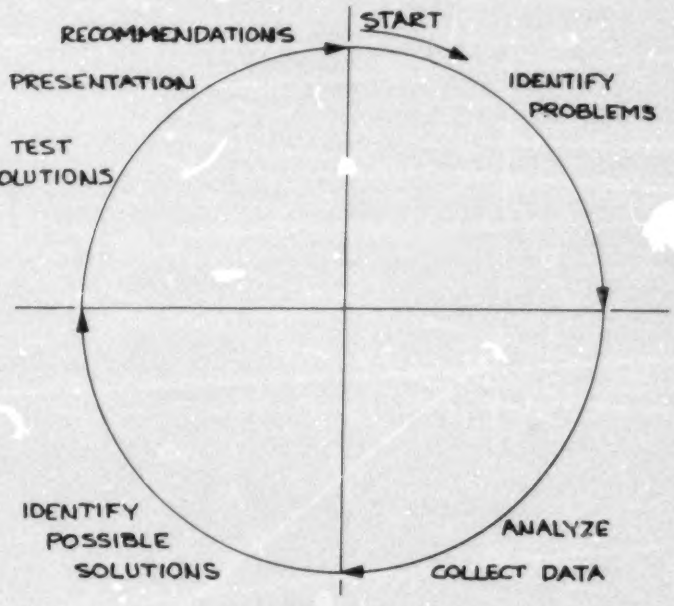
Situational Leadership

The one-minute manager ideas build upon Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory. Briefly stated, the theory argues that leadership style may need to vary from situation to situation depending upon the "maturity level" of the employees. "M-1 individuals" need structure and guidance and prefer leaders who tell them what to do. The focus is on achieving goal clarity.

"M-2 individuals" can be told what to achieve but perform better if they agree with the goals. They prefer leaders who sell goals to them. "M-3 and M-4 individuals" are moderately or strongly interested in being involved in the decision-making process of the organization. They like leaders who participate or who delegate. M-3 and M-4 employees should be actively involved in decision-making processes.

Quality Circles

Apparently one of the most effective ways to involve employees from all levels in the decision process of the organization is by some variation on the quality circles process. First developed by American quality control experts for Japan following World War II, the quality circles process has been refined by tens of thousands of iterations in Japanese business and industry. The process has now been brought back to the United States and is in use in thousands of businesses.



Now that the first results from testing this new process in schools are becoming available, the process appears to be of real value for schools. The Vancouver (Washington) Public School District No. 37 has participated in a multidistrict national research project examining potential changes in attitudes about work by circle and noncircle members (Sorle 1984). Preliminary results indicate that there are significant positive attitudinal changes related to participation in circles.

The Oregon City (Oregon) School District is in the third year of a three-year research project funded by the Northwest Area Foundation. Successful circles have been started among clerical, instructional, and administrative staffs. Two successful circles are in operation in high school

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classrooms, and additional circles are forming within the community as well. Preliminary data analysis indicates significant changes in overall attitudes toward work and also rapid increase in understanding and use of effective problem-solving techniques in decision-making wherever circles exist.

Other school districts are finding success, and problems, with this new structured process. Ackley's 1984 survey identified sixty districts nationwide experimenting with circles. These districts include Orlando, Florida; Mad River in Dayton, Ohio; the Muskegon Public Schools in Michigan; and Santa Clara Unified in California. Thus far, data indicate that the quality circles process is effective in solving problems and that employee attitudes about work usually improve as well

Cost savings have not been as easy to document; lack of savings is listed as one of the leading reasons for circle failure, along with length of time to reach a solution, inadequate training, and insufficient time or funds to staff properly the quality circles program. The Clark County School District in Las Vegas, Nevada, tried eight circles and found increased productivity at all eight sites (Little 1983).

Quality circles do not always work; the management literature includes numerous examples of circle programs that collapsed because the program was not adequately supported, because training was inadequate, or because facilitation was insufficient. It is possible for this process to backfire completely if management backs out of an initial commitment to the process, uses the process to identify "troublemakers," or refuses to implement proposed solutions without adequate explanation for denial (Kahn 1984).

Improved Problem Solving

One of the reasons quality circles work is that they include good, solid problem-solving techniques. In a 1983 Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development survey, respondents were asked to identify the most critical problem areas facing education in the 1980s. Over 70 percent listed the need for improved tools to promote effective decision-making and problem-solving among the top ten ranked problems.

The research on effective problem-solving procedures is quite inaccessible. Heavily laced with mathematic models and detailed logical sequences, most of the theory requires years of study to reach understanding. The quality circles process, on the other hand, includes a straightforward framework upon which complex methods can be hung, but only as needed to solve a particular problem. Figure 1 is a simple diagram of the process.

Particular techniques are taught to circle members only as needed and only as related to the specific problem being solved. The strength of the process rests in the fact that it is determined in advance and then is followed closely with the assistance of a trained facilitator.

Transformation and Participation

Two additional developments in current management literature may also be of interest to school-based professionals interested in increasing levels of participative management. Neither of these developments is based in documented research findings; nevertheless, each is an interesting theoretical extension of findings to date.

Organizational Transformation (OT) theorists go beyond the familiar organizational development (OD) language of the seventies and eighties to a wholistic theory of transformation of the organization through establishing a vision of what is desired for the organization and then working to create that vision through clearly articulated humanistic values. Whereas OD focuses on form and function, OT focuses on energy, vision, and "flow." The almost intuitive vision development is discussed in terms of "myth" and "ritual." OT articles are as likely to refer to Buckminster Fuller or Pierre Teilhard de Chardin as to Maslow or Waterman or Steers.

Nelson and Burns perhaps best explicate this theoretical extension in their 1984 articles. They describe most organizations as Reactive, that is, past focused, punitive to change agents, with fragmented structure, and leaders focused on the old Theory X enforcement. The next level of organizations is termed Responsive--present focused, active, adaptive to change, with hierarchical structure and leaders who focus on "coaching the team" to success.

The next level of organization is defined as Proactive--future-oriented, focused on results, actively encouraging planned change, with a matrix organization and leaders focused on communicating goals and purpose of the organization.

The High Performing organization, on the other hand, focuses on past, present, and future. It focuses on excellence, its plans are constantly evolving based on new input and understanding, and it has a networked structure and leaders who help empower others through their leadership. Elements of participative management can be identified in this developing theory, but the theory itself is extended beyond current participative theory.

A second area of theory development is in participatory research (Brown 1985). At first glance, this looks like the time-tested, field-based research with which we are familiar. However, at closer reading, Brown is suggesting

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something considerably more revolutionary. He follows Freire's earlier work on extending education to the uneducated in order to make them conscious of the reasons for and extent of their oppression. Inquiry in a research project would be focused on local problems and pragmatic concerns and would be developed (as in the quality circles process) by the participants themselves. Brown theorizes that there may be no faster way to document inequities or inefficiencies and that this will lead to inevitable change.

Summary

This is a time of exciting experimentation in management process in both business and schools. Education learns from the entrepreneurial experimentation of the private sector; businesses and industry can learn about service-related applications from education.

Teachers and staff who have long had much to contribute to improved instruction and the improved management of schools have not always had a way to get those good ideas into the decision-making process. Now, there are tested techniques available to increase the chance that the best ideas lead directly to the best practice.

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